



Funeral service for the 17 miners killed at Box Flat Colliery Ipswich disaster was held as the No 5 shaft continued to belch black smoke. Picture: Brisbane Telegraph

by Peter Foley

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THOSE who heard that ominously deep, thudding explosion from 275m underground early on July 31, 1972, and lived through the terrible aftermath will never forget the horrors.

In the wake of the Box Flat disaster, the Mining Warden's Court Inquiry tried to make sense of the terrible loss of life. Box Flat mine at Swanbank opened in 1969 and its coal was mined for Swanbank Power Station.

About 4.30pm on Sunday, July 30, 1972, the manager of Box Flat Alex Lawrie noticed a small underground fire when he turned on the ventilation fans.

Mr Lawrie called Inspector of Mines Reg Hardie and he went to the colliery later that day.

By the time Mr Hardie went down, accompanied by Mr Lawrie and others, the fire was burning fiercely and was much bigger.

At that stage, the movement of air was very brisk, to use Mr Hardie's words, although the ventilation had been reduced.



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Mr Hardie said the airflow increased to a great velocity and it was apparent to him the fire could not be extinguished by water.

After they had been down for some time, Pat Farrell advised him there was smoke coming down the intake and advised getting the men out.

All returned to the surface about 10.20pm. To Mr Hardie, the presence of the smoke indicated recirculation.

He and some other men went back into the mine about 11.15pm to try and close a pair of doors but were forced back because there was too much smoke. A further attempt was made to reach the doors using self-contained breathing equipment but it also had to be aborted.

"At this juncture, it was apparent that our underground attempts to get around this fire were finished. We had to try another avenue," Mr Hardie told the inquiry.

"We actually were in retreat from the fire, rather than advancing on it."

They again returned to the surface about 12.15am. After further discussions, it was decided to investigate the practicality of cutting off the air intake that was feeding the fire.

Mr Hardie, Mr Lawrie and others boarded a man and supply rake and again entered the mine.

They returned to the surface about 1.20am and a further discussion took place.

It was decided it was feasible to make an attempt to control the fire by temporarily sealing off a tunnel linking two mine shafts 450m from the surface.

A team of men entered the mine tunnel with the intention of carrying out this decision.

The next day, the Queensland Times reported Mr Hardie had one foot on the rake that took the men underground when he decided to go back to the mine office to check on the underground plan instead.

A short time afterwards, John Roach, a member of the Mines Rescue team, rang the surface to say the team was ready to come out, when there was a massive explosion about 2.45am on Monday, July 31.

Just before, mine electrician and rugby league player Jim Foreman was at the mine entrance helping fill sandbags to seal off the fire.

He said someone told him Dud Beattie was looking for him to have some telephone lines taken down.

When the blast went off, he and Mr Beattie, a former rugby league international, were "half-protected" by a fibro wall

they sheltered behind.

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The decision to seal the mine to prevent further explosions was made at a top-level conference of mining officials.

Some people away from the centre of the decision-making held on to the belief the men could have survived the explosion by retreating to a safe part of the tunnel. Those who had to make the decisions knew differently.

The consensus was that none of the miners underground could have survived the devastating explosion. The Chief Inspector of Mines Bill Roach made the decision to seal the mine.

John Roach was his nephew and he was entombed along with the other 13 men.

They, along with three miners on the surface near the entrance to the mine, were killed and 10 others were injured.

One man died months later from his injuries. Eight of those killed were from the Mines Rescue Station.

Ipswich Mayor James Finimore described the tragedy as the worst experienced in Ipswich and expressed sympathy to the families who suffered loss.

Newly-wed Senator Neville Bonner returned from Bribie Island after hearing news of the tragedy on a radio news report.

"I'm not quite over the shock yet," Senator Bonner told the QT after he went out to Swanbank.

State Member for Ipswich Dr Llew Edwards and other state representatives also said they were deeply shocked.

Work on sealing the mine the morning after was halted for a religious service for the 14 entombed men, on the rise overlooking the pithead.

The brief but moving service, conducted by leaders of multiple faiths, was attended by about 150 miners, the Queensland Governor and local, state and federal representatives against a backdrop of thick black smoke that blotted out the morning sun.

Thousands of others went to churches around the city to pray for those whose lives were lost and, later, to attend their funerals.

Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen attended a service at St Paul's Anglican Church.

Immediately after the disaster, the Queensland Times, Ipswich radio station 4IP and mining unions launched an appeal for the families of the victims.

Queensland Times editor Greg Stephenson urged public support for the appeal. It raised tens of thousands of dollars.

"No community can stand such a loss," Mr Stephenson said.

The Mining Warden's Court Inquiry returned its findings on November 7, 1972. They included:

It appears no one questioned the course of conduct proposed, from which it follows that all present were apparently in agreement with the assessment of the position made by the manager, the Inspector of Mines and other members of the team when they conferred from time to time.

It appears that the failure of all these people to advert to the distinct possibility of danger from explosion stems from widespread lack of knowledge of the danger associated with conditions which prevailed that night.

That thought there was still a chance of controlling the fire by underground sealing is made manifest by their going underground on the last occasion. Mr Roach's conversations with the Inspector of Mines and the Mine Manager immediately before the explosion serve to confirm this.

Whether a more accurate assessment of the position should have been made, and the men withdrawn, is, no doubt, open to question, but the fact remains that not a single person put forward a contrary proposal at any stage.

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